

STATEMENT BY

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BEFORE

**THE HOUSE HOMELAND SECURITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION SECURITY**

ON

**“SCREENING PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM: WHY IS A JOB-CREATING,
PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP MEETING RESISTANCE AT TSA?”**

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Chairman Rogers, Ranking Member Jackson Lee, and committee members: On behalf of the American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO (AFGE), thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the Screening Partnership Program (SPP) of the Transportation Security Administration.

After the terrorist attacks on 9/11, America learned that the system of private screening companies and the private screeners in place on that fateful day were incompetent to perform the task of keeping terrorists off our passenger aircraft. As a result, Congress federalized airport screening in recognition that the job of screening airline passengers and maintaining the security of the commercial aviation system was fundamental to our security as a nation. Since then, our skies have been kept safe, despite constant threats.

There isn't much that scares me. But the thought of returning to the days prior to 9/11, and to the expanded use of private contractors who are forced to cut corners to increase profits . . . *that* scares me.

Aviation security is too important to be left to the private sector. I know the free-market advocates will recoil when I say that, but as we have seen over and over since 9/11, the terrorists will never quit trying to attack us. Private contractors must by their very nature keep their eyes on the bottom line. That consideration cannot help but bleed over into decisions on staffing, training, recruitment, retention and operations. As a frequent flyer myself – and I know the members of this Committee are as well – it seems beyond question to me that we should want the federal government to continue to provide the focus, the consistency and the

stability that this mission requires. If we learned nothing else from 9/11, I would hope we learned *that*.

SPP is not new, and the problems with SPP are not new. Airports have had the ability to “opt out” of the federal screener system since TSA was created, but in those ten years only a handful of 450 have chosen to do so. Opting out means opting *in* to the lowest bidder, which is not how homeland security should operate. It is too important to be left to companies that would not be accountable to the American people. There is no contracting out of the Secret Service, FBI, Border Patrol, Customs and Border Protection Officers, or the Capitol Police who protect Members of Congress and their staffs. Those agencies are all part of an integrated network designed to keep Americans safe. TSA should be no different. I think most Members of Congress would be reluctant to have the Capitol Police splintered into five or six private security companies, with each operating a different section of the capitol complex.

SPP is not about creating jobs as the topic of this hearing implies. TSA has created almost 50,000 jobs. These are good jobs, although the pay is still too low and working conditions need to improve. Moving these jobs to the private sector is, at best, a zero sum game after the private contractors take their profit off the top.

The drumbeat to privatize security screening operations runs contrary to laws enacted by Congress in recent years requiring government agencies to insource functions that are inherently governmental. Recent efforts to reform procurement practices at government agencies and reduce their over-reliance on private contracting also argue against privatizing TSA’s screening work.

The federal government is obligated to the American taxpayers to perform its functions efficiently and spend taxpayer money wisely. Generally, before privatizing federal employee work, agencies are required to demonstrate that a contractor is more efficient. Under TSA's Screening Partnership Program, the agency keeps the transportation screening managers but hires a contractor to create an additional layer of management, and converts the frontline homeland security federal employees to contract workers.

There is no doubt that TSA and its federal screening workforce have protected our nation from a repeat of the horror of 9/11. Rather than calling for the dismantling of an agency that is living up to its mission, despite constant challenges, proponents of private screeners should instead work to empower federal screeners to do their jobs better. Only a well-trained, well-paid, fully empowered professional public workforce can provide the protection the American people need.

TSOs receive constant and ongoing training, including changing protocols or using new technology at a moment's notice to address new terrorist threats. These protocols can change from day-to-day or even shift-to-shift. The training TSOs receive is conducted by government employees and based on threat detection and risk assessment from the federal government's national security, homeland security and intelligence agencies. TSA may be required to renegotiate contracts when deploying new technology, resulting in delays, increased costs and holes in the aviation security net. It is not credible that screeners working for private contractors have the same capability to adjust procedures to address emergent threats as TSOs working for Administrator Pistole.

In conclusion, every single day America's patriotic TSOs are more than diligent at their duties because the last thing they want is for a terrorist to slip through on their watch. This is the same goal as TSA management. A TSO workforce with workplace rights and protections — including the ability to have AFGE speak on their behalf — is empowered to report problems with procedures or gaps in security. The goal of keeping air travel safe for the flying public is mutual between TSA and its employees.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to address the issues surrounding SPP. I would be happy to answer any questions that you or the Members of the Committee may have.